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THE PEASANTRY OF SCOTLAND.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR W. G. BLAIKIE, D. D., LL. D.

PROBABLY it was the "Cottar's Saturday Night" of Burns, reinforced perhaps by Sir Walter Scott's "Davie Deans," that gave definite form to that conception of the Scottish peasantry which for a long time has held possession of the general mind. It is doubtful, however, whether at any time such men were more to the general mass than stars of the first magnitude are to the other lights of the firmament. The sample was better than the stock. All that could be said for the mass of the people was that there were influences at work in their up-bringing that tended to produce an industrious, intelligent, thrifty, self-controlled, and godly people; on the whole, these influences were fairly efficient, while in select cases they culminated, and gave us the Christian heroes whose memory we delight to honor. It was the strong hand of religion that was the leading force, the fear of God, fed by Covenanting memories, gave a giant's strength to conscience; it absolutely annihilated the idea of self-indulgence in its common forms; it set plain men "to scorn delights and live laborious days"; and yet it did not leave them indifferent to the rewards of industry or careless of success in life.

Of course there were exceptions. Too often John Barleycorn relaxed the moral sinews, enfeebled the will, and left the character self-indulged, flabby, and good for little or nothing. But there was enough of the better spirit to put a stamp on the peasantry generally; to give a character of its own, for example, to the "Black Watch" and other crack regiments of the army, and to insure success for Scottish emigrants in colonies and foreign countries. "The Scot Abroad" was a sturdy customer, notwithstanding his weaknesses and prejudices, and bore the stamp of the national motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit*. In England the Scot had a kind of monopoly of gardening and other em-

ployments that demand special skill and intelligence. There is a story of an Aberdonian, head-gardener to an English nobleman, who was once asked how it happened that his countrymen usually filled such situations. "Oh," he replied, "you English are good enough at ordinar' things; but for gardeners, and ministers, and a' kinds o' head-wark, it's *hiz* ye maun come to!"

How is it now? The nineteenth century has been a terrible revolutionist, and in some respects it has made "the olden time" very olden indeed. Has it revolutionized the Scottish peasant? Carlyle believed it had; his grand old father was, he thought, *ultimus Romanorum*, the last of a noble race. But Carlyle looked with prejudiced, not to say jaundiced, eyes. What misled him was that peasants of the James Carlyle and David Hope breed, though they shone as constellations or groups, shone only here and there; in their own neighborhood they may have left no successors; but it by no means followed that there were no such stars in other parts of the sky. "*Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona*," and there have been grand specimens of Scottish peasantry since the days of the Ecclefechan mason. Neil Livingstone, tea pedlar, the father of the great missionary explorer, was quite worthy to stand beside James Carlyle; and so was John Paton, of Torthorwald, Dumfriesshire, stocking weaver and afterwards colporteur, the father of Dr. John G. Paton, now famous as one of the most chivalrous and successful of modern missionaries. That little Torthorwald cottage, with its "but and ben" and closet between, lay very near the gate of heaven; the "but," the scene of the clatter and rattle of half a dozen noisy handlooms; the "ben," of the whole family life; and the mid-room, of daily communion with heaven, where the pathetic echoes of the old man's trembling voice would occasionally be heard pleading as if for life, but from which he would emerge "with the happy light of a new-born smile that seemed to be always dawning upon his face." The outlook from "A Window in Thrums" reveals men and women of similar type; simple but not stupid; inflexible in their sense of duty; their earnings often falling far below even "the living wage," and yet with a dignity of character arising from their interest in things unseen that poverty could not destroy. If Carlyle had taken a wider survey, he would have found stars of the first magnitude still shining in Scotland, if not in Ecclefechan.

Not a few such instances could be produced, unknown to fame, illustrating a thirst for knowledge, a laborious diligence, a self-denying heroism, a moral and spiritual elevation hardly eclipsed in former days. Of all the old features, perhaps the thirst for knowledge retains its strength best. Where parents see a love and aptitude for learning in any of their sons, they are still as willing as of old to do their utmost to gratify it. We know the case of a minister of the gospel, who, besides being a devoted preacher and pastor, has done good literary work, and who came to study for the ministry under the following circumstances. His brother and he were converted at the same time, and both were seized with an intense desire to become preachers of the gospel. In Scotland, the necessary studies require at least seven years, and the parents, at the utmost, could help but one of the brothers. Each was willing to surrender his own wish and help the other, but the difficulty was to decide which was to be taken and which left. They agreed to refer the matter to their minister, but as he thought their gifts and graces equal he could not decide. At last it was resolved to decide the case by their ages, but it was to the younger that this gave the advantage, as both were beyond the customary age. The elder helped his brother, but remained in his own occupation, and both are now, in their way, serving their Master. Mr. Crockett, in his story entitled "*The Stickit Minister*," has worked out this line with some painful additions; the self-denying youth who gave up the ministry to help his brother to study medicine died of illness caused by his hard work and exposure, and did not even enjoy the gratification of finding his brother grateful for his noble sacrifices.

Cases are not uncommon of young workingmen struggling like David Livingstone to teach themselves the elements of Latin, and cherishing the hope that by careful saving of their wages they may be able to attend college and get a liberal education. The example of old John Brown of Haddington, the famous author of "*The Self-Interpreting Bible*," has still its followers. The son of a poor weaver, and compelled through poverty to engage himself as a shepherd, with miserable emoluments, he contrived to gain a fair acquaintance with Latin and Greek. Eager to possess a copy of the Greek Testament, he got a friend to take charge of his flock for a day, and at night set out on foot for St. Andrews, a distance of twenty-four miles, to make his pur-

chase. In the bookseller's shop were some gentlemen, one of whom, amazed that such a boy should make such a purchase, said to him, "Boy, if you can read that book I'll give it to you for nothing." He acquitted himself to admiration, and returned like Jacob's son from Egypt, with his purchase and his money to the bargain. A case of a farm-boy who had taught himself the rudiments of Latin, and who, under the guidance of a neighboring clergyman, is preparing for a university, is known to the present writer, and doubtless there are many more such. But the way of advancement for such youths is now easier than it was, chiefly through the institution by private benevolence of what are called "Grammar School Bursaries," the object of which is to enable promising lads to gain by competition sums of money to help them in their studies; the fact that these are gained by competition taking away the semblance of charity and preserving their independence undamaged.

There have been several notable instances of late years of Scotchmen in the poorest conditions of life making their names illustrious by their contributions to natural science. Hugh Miller belongs to a past generation; but within the easy recollection of the present we have had Thomas Edward, Robert Dick, and John Duncan. Two of these, Mr. Edward and Mr. Dick, have had their biographies written by Mr. Samuel Smiles. Edward, who was the son of a private soldier, and himself a working shoemaker, through an irrepressible passion for natural history, collected many specimens and discovered new species which he classified, described, and exhibited. He was made a Fellow of the Linnæan Society and of the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh, and obtained from the Queen a pension of £50 a year. Dick, a self-taught geologist and botanist, was a baker in Thurso; and Duncan, whose achievements in science were commemorated in *Good Words* in the days of Norman Macleod, was, if we remember rightly, a weaver in an Aberdeenshire village. We fear that this worthy man was too like other prophets who get but scant honor in their own country; but on one occasion he bade fair to get more honor than he desired. Some idle lads having taunted him that, with all his science, he could not get fruit to grow on a solitary juniper bush, he told them to come back in autumn, and they would see. Meanwhile, understanding how to fertilize the juniper seeds, he brought from a distance the needed pollen, and

when the lads came to see, lo and behold, an ample crop of berries ! They thought he must be verily a warlock.

The practice of family worship is undoubtedly much less common than it once was, but it is by no means extinct even in the poorest class. And the deep earnestness of the olden time is also met with. It is the happiness of the present writer to be acquainted with not a few men in country districts, usually small farmers and mechanics, who have been called to the office of "elders" in their congregations, and who are held in profound respect for their moral integrity and high character, as well as for their consistent Christian profession. Neither has it been his lot to come in contact with many who were hypocrites. That there are such no one could deny ; but they do not bear that proportion to the ranks of honest men that one would infer from what one reads in fiction. From novels one would suppose that a pronounced religious man was just as likely to be a hypocrite as not ; this, I am convinced, is quite untrue.

But apart from particular instances it has been made abundantly evident, from the recent history of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, that the great body of the Scottish peasantry have not lost their interest in matters of religion. Fifty years ago, when the Free Church gave up the emoluments derived from the State, there were cases without number of both men and women risking and even losing their whole means of support, as the Covenanters did in former days, out of regard to conscientious conviction. It was when he heard of the ministers marching to Canonmills that Lord Jeffrey said he was proud of his country, and that in no other land would such a sacrifice have been made to principle ; but throughout the whole country there might have been found common men and women of the like spirit, farmers who lost their farms, tradesmen their custom, servants their places, teachers their schools, governesses their situations, in the same cause ; not to speak of the bitter scowl and furious scoldings to which they were exposed when the gentry chose to open fire upon them. The times are quieter now, but deep in many a heart sleeps the olden spirit, only needing to be roused to show itself capable of the same sacrifices as before.

Somehow the typical representative of the godly cottar has always been a man ; but it needs hardly to be said that such men

would have been much more rare but for their godly mothers before them. And many is the noble life of toil and struggle that such mothers have led. There comes across me the recollection of a poor woman known to me some years ago, the wife of a drunken husband and the mother of a large family, who used to struggle from early morn to past midnight in a crowded, stuffy apartment, adding to the employments of wife, mother, nurse, cook, and housemaid, that of the dressmaker for her neighbors in order to keep her family respectable. Never a murmur did I hear from her lips ; on she went, serene, patient, ever-plodding, and not without hope ; nor, I may add, without reward ; for at the eleventh hour her husband was reclaimed, and some of her children turned out splendidly.

Some years ago a beautiful picture of a peasant mother was given to the world by her daughter, the author of a prize essay on the Sabbath, which was published under favorable auspices. "I owe all to my parents," she said, "but especially to my mother ; her earnest and indefatigable exertions, in the face of difficulties which would have appalled any common mind from attempting such a task, together with her ceaseless watchfulness, secured for us such an amount of knowledge and formed in us such habits as raised us above the temptations that usually beset youth in the humble walks of life." The income of the family was small, and the number of the children was unusually large ; and, moreover, their home was situated so far from church and school that they were unable to attend either. Here was a case where in ordinary circumstances the children must have grown up like heathens and savages. But through the tact and care of the parents it was quite otherwise. The mother used to take the children one after another four times a day, and give them a short lesson, even though she might be standing at the wash-tub. The lessons she would teach them were not an amusement, but a serious business that must not be trifled with. Moreover, she trained them to understand from their very infancy, that the great God of heaven had sent them to her and their father to be taken care of, loved, and taught ; and that God would be highly displeased with her if she allowed them to be untruthful, disobedient, or quarrelsome. A prompt and cheerful submission to parental control was the first habit the parents sought to form ; other good habits were added with comparative ease. Every

one was trained to be useful. If the mother had to supply the place of schoolmaster, the father in like manner had to be pastor on Sundays. After family worship, he would give them a hymn or passage of scripture to learn, and in fine weather the summer-house or the clump of trees near their cottage would furnish the requisite place of study. During the afternoon the mother would read to them or they would read all round some suitable book. And books were very scarce. Once, a leaf from a hymn-book was found on the edge of the burn, and nothing could show better the scarcity of the printed page than the avidity with which it was seized and the hymn committed to memory.

Quite recently a shepherd's wife, whose path to the far-away church lay through a meadow along the banks of a quiet stream, remarked to her minister that, instead of finding the way long, she could have wished it longer, for she seemed to be walking along the twenty-third Psalm—"He leadeth me beside the still waters."

We have given samples of a class of peasantry still to be found in the country districts of Scotland, although it is not so common as before. For many things have contributed to change the people's habits, and to change them for the worse.

One of these things is the creation of large estates and large farms, and the diminution of the number of crofts and small holdings. In former days a great part of Scotland consisted of small properties, often farmed by their owners. Where the properties were larger, they were divided into small farms, the tenants of which constituted what may be called the "cotter" population. The trend of things for the last two-centuries has been towards enlargement both of properties and farms. Large proprietors, eager to increase their territories, have been on the watch for small properties, and have generally acquired them whenever they came into the market, mortgaging them heavily for the price. Till quite recently the law allowed proprietors to make strict entail of their property to their own offspring from generation to generation, and this was commonly done, for it raised the status of a family when it owned a fine estate that could not be alienated. Now, however, there are legal facilities for breaking entails, and in consequence several large estates have been broken up.

Still, however, the property of the soil in Scotland is in very few hands, and some of our noblemen own enormous tracts. And

with large properties there have come large farms. In some Highland districts the policy of evicting crofters and small farmers, and turning their land into huge sheep farms and deer forests, was carried out in many cases with the most ruthless severity. In other parts of the country the change has been effected more quietly, but with the result that in many districts small farms are not to be got ; no man can be a farmer unless he has command of a large amount of capital.

These changes have been much against the peasantry. For a young man starting life as a laborer or farm servant, there is no outlet now in such districts, no way of improving his condition ; he must be a laborer to the end, dependent on the farmer who employs him ; and when through years he becomes unfit for hard labor, his prospect is truly dark ; indeed he has no prospect at all. Young men in such circumstances prefer going into our towns in the hope that they may find more promising employment there : or perhaps they emigrate to the colonies or the United States. It is the universal lamentation that our rural population is decreasing, while the towns are growing ; for the towns are neither so healthy nor so favorable to moral and spiritual character. A friend writes me that twenty-five years ago two of his relatives who began life as farm servants contrived, by extraordinary economy, to save £600, through which they were enabled to rent first one farm, then another, of 130 acres. These were rare cases even twenty-five years ago, the difficulties being overcome only through the extraordinary energy of the young men, and to-day the difficulties would be still greater ; but in days of old the transition from laborer to small farmer was comparatively easy, and while the prospect gave an impulse to the laborer it satisfied him when it became a reality ; and the same prospect lay before his sons.

I am afraid that it cannot be said that the same thrifty habits prevail now among our peasantry that were so marked in former times. Scotland was miserably poor a hundred and fifty years ago ; although with the exception of outlying Highland districts, it now presents little difference from England. In those days unless people were thrifty they could not live. With the growth of wealth the ideas of the common people have become higher, and I fear thrift has become rarer. The present writer was much surprised, on occasion of a recent visit to a part of Aberdeenshire

with which he had been connected long ago, to observe a great change in the social life of the people. They were better housed, better clothed, and better fed. In many cases—cases of farmers renting perhaps a hundred acres—instead of the wretched “but and ben,” with the clay floor and the box-bed, there were nice cottages of several apartments, curtained and carpeted, with photographs and other works of art on the walls and a piano in the parlor. For myself I rejoice in such improvements, nor do I think that their effect is necessarily hurtful to character. On the contrary, I believe with Dr. Chalmers that the desire for a better style of life is a wholesome stimulus to the poor, and that it is favorable rather than otherwise to the improvement of the character. Still those who are much among the poor believe that thrift is not now practised as it might be, and from this obvious evils ensue. Where wastefulness gets a footing there is a temptation to the mother to go out to work in order to increase the earnings, leaving the family to the care of some small girl who can be hired for a trifle. There is also a temptation to send the children out to earn their living by anything that offers, instead of apprenticing them to a trade and thus providing for the future. Drunkenness, too, has played terrible havoc in too many cases with our working people, and though the country population are comparatively free from that vice, yet those who go to settle in towns are terribly exposed to its insidious advance, and when they fall under its influence, become as bad as any.

We cannot enlarge on other influences that have tended to modify the character of our peasantry. Our railways and telegraphs, unifying our little country, and obliterating local and provincial landmarks; our cheap press, flooding us day by day with all kinds of news, and telling us how we should think and act and feel in reference to everything; the rapid spread of fashions in dress, superseding the “mutches” and “mittens” of former days, and making the dress and appearance of all degrees much more alike; the political privileges conferred on the whole people, compelling them to think and act on matters common to them and those of higher station; the enlarged scope of education in the Board schools, opening up new avenues of knowledge and quickening dormant faculties—have all had a sensible influence on the Scottish peasantry. The unsophisticated simplicity of former days has given place to a more wide-

awake outlook—to more regard for interests and rights that were little thought of in days of yore. This, too, cannot be complained of; and if only deep principle lie at the bottom of the character, it cannot do harm. But it makes the situation more risky, and probably increases the number that fail in the battle of life.

In social matters, the great battle of the future in Scotland must be connected with the land. Smaller properties, smaller farms and more numerous allotments to laborers are everywhere needed. Happily a feeling is alive in all classes that something ought to be done to check the exodus from the country districts and make rural life more attractive to the young. Whether the parish councils that will soon be in operation will effect much in this direction remains to be seen. The sentiments of the present Prime Minister (Lord Rosebery), recently expressed in reply to an address from the London County Council, and the views he cherishes in reference to the relations of the several classes of society to each other, entitle him to very cordial thanks at the hands of all friends of the people, and if carried out would have a wonderful effect in checking revolutionary tendencies and promoting the stability and prosperity of the country.

W. GARDEN BLAIKIE.